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SUBJECT: BASRA PROVINCE IRAN-IRAQ BORDER POST: NO PROOF OF LETHAL  
AID, BUT CONCERNS REMAIN

REF: A. A) BASRAH 052                      B) BAGHDAD 366                      C) BAGHDAD 343  
      [1](#)B. D) 08 BAGHDAD 2964            E) 08 BAGHDAD 3475

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CLASSIFIED BY: John Naland, Leader, PRT Basra, Dept of State.

REASON: 1.4 (d), (g)

[1](#)1. (U) This is a Basra PRT reporting cable.

Summary

[1](#)2. (S/NF) Operations, equipment and procedures at the Shalamsha port of entry (POE) at the Iraq-Iran border are under-financed and inadequate for appropriate cargo and passenger screening. The POE lacks clear lines of authority as a dozen GOI agencies vie for control. Border control authorities enter passengers through border control databases. They identify only a handful as "travelers of interest" to detain. In response to these problems, the US civilian-military Point of Entry Training Team (POETT) has initiated and funded improvements and training. While GOI and USG officials agree that vulnerabilities to lethal aid exist at the POE, they have found no real evidence of it. Officials also suspect that other smuggling occurs along the lightly monitored border. Other challenges include POE corruption, incompetence, under-resourcing, and enforcing basic rule of law. Financial Systems Assessment Team officials identify the lack of bank branches and a viable national customs declaration policy as further vulnerabilities. If the GOI expects to cement and build on USG initiatives to bring the POE up to international standards, it will have to match the efforts of POETT with much harder work and more good will. End summary.

Background on Shalamsha

[1](#)3. (C) Basra Province has three POEs: Shalamsha; the Iraq-Kuwait overland border at Safwan; and the Port of Umm Qasr. Shalamsha is 13 miles due east of Basra, and around 20 miles northwest of Khorramshahr, Iran. On the Iraqi side, a two-lane highway leads to the POE flanked by vacant wasteland. Like other Iraq-Iran POEs, Shalamsha was closed from the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq war in 1980 until 2003. It reopened for passenger and commercial traffic in 2003. The GOI closed it to cargo during the March 2008 Charge of the Knights campaign against Iranian-supported militias. It reopened January 2009. Since then, cargo and passenger throughput has increased. The POE, which employs approximately 360 people, is open about 12 hours per day, seven days per week. Passengers, but not cargo, cross on Fridays. Typical traffic volumes can be seen in the week of

October 29 to November 5, 2009. During that time, the POE processed 3,985 travelers inbound to Iraq, 3,655 travelers outbound to Iran, and 761 cargo trucks. Duties collected for that week totaled USD 74,600 and taxes equaled USD 13,500. POETT calculations project around USD 3.6 million in total tariffs, taxes, visa fees, and duties during 2009.

#### Confused Lines of Authority

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¶4. (C) Like the Port of Umm Qasr (ref A), the Shalamsha POE lacks any clear line of authority. The POE is nominally headed by a representative from the GOI's Ports of Entry Directorate, under the Ministry of Interior, but Deputy Director Kareem told PRT EconOff that their control is more persuasive than legal or operational. Over a dozen different ministries and agencies vie for control, including the ministries of Health, Interior, Civil Customs, Defense, Tourism, National Security, Agriculture, Finance, Transportation, and the Iraqi National Intelligence Service (INIS).

#### USG Presence

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¶5. (C) MNF-I forces and DHS contractors maintain a nearby POETT. Operating since early 2009, it works to train, mentor and advise Iraqi border officials and inspectors, improve command and control, and help to clearly delineate roles and responsibilities among the various GOI entities.

#### One Way Trade: Iran Exports to Iraq

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¶6. (C) US and GOI authorities confirm that POE trade is 100 percent one-way, with all goods going from Iran into Iraq. A daily average of 120 empty Iraqi trucks enters Iranian territory to load up Iranian goods. Iranian goods are largely comprised of construction materials (cement, bricks, re-bar, ceramic tiles, and Styrofoam panels), some agricultural produce

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(tomatoes, watermelon, potatoes, apples, cucumber, onions, and green peppers), dry grocery goods (fish and packaged cookies), refrigerated dairy products, and automobiles (around 300 per week). It is difficult to obtain any accurate provincial trade statistics on this aspect of Iran-Iraq trade as Iraq's statistics agency, COSIT, does not gather or disseminate across provinces. The inadequate customs procedures and equipment make it difficult to accurately gauge the scope of trade at the POE.

#### Passenger Traffic: Largely Elderly Iranian Pilgrims

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¶7. (C) The isolated clutch of ramshackle containers in the middle of the desert seems an unlikely place for a busy border crossing that processes over one-half million passengers per year. According to POETT data, an average of 1,640 passengers enter or exit the POE daily. POE officials report that around 90 percent of Iranian travelers are mostly older Iranian religious pilgrims visiting Iraqi Shi'a holy sites of Najaf and Karbala. Once Iranian passengers enter the Iraqi side, they board one of the many buses and minivans waiting to take them to Basra city. In recent months, the U.S. military constructed an extensive overhead passageway system, providing relief from the intense sun and heat. Other construction has improved what was a passenger bottleneck.

¶8. (S) GOI officials process incoming passengers via the PISCES (Personnel Identification Secure Comparison and Evaluation System) border control database. Iranian males between 14 and 65 years of age are taken aside to be fingerprinted and photographed by USG officials using the biometric BATS (Biometric Automated Toolset) system. According to USG and GOI officials, only a handful of "travelers of interest" have been found and detained at this POE in 2009. However, they caution that this is not a watertight system. It is possible to enter

Iraq overland along the vast and largely unmonitored border. Baggage and passenger screening is done by x-ray baggage scanners, bomb-sniffing dogs, and/or walk-through metal detectors. Officials caution that these machines are not always functioning. A shortage of female Iraqi border guards means that women travelers are sometimes not searched. According to POETT officials, no lethal aid has been detected at the POE during the time it has been present. Other than the equipment mentioned, the POE lacks explosive- or drug-detecting devices.

#### Cargo Screening Procedures

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¶9. (C) Iraqi trucks wait to cross to a transfer loading dock on the Iranian side to pick up cargo out of the sight of GOI inspectors. When the trucks return, customs inspectors scan them with a single back-scatter x-ray. Two are necessary for a full view of cargo trucks but only one of the three units on site is currently operational. Health inspectors have the rarely exercised discretion to send samples of food to Basra for testing. Inspectors weigh cargo on a single, rickety scale. POETT officials cite the need for a secondary inspection area, which would relieve the pressure on the inspectors to conduct inspections quickly to keep the traffic moving.

#### Operations, Equipment, and Procedural Shortfalls; US POETT Provides Limited Assistance

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¶10. (C) Iraqi and USG officials at the POE contend that operations, equipment, and procedures are under-financed and inadequate for appropriate cargo screening. POETT officials deem POE leadership to be inefficient and possibly corrupt. Buildings, equipment, and housing are old. Electricity supply and connections are haphazard and hazardous. There is no Iraqi grid connection to the site and Iran provides a weak and sometimes intermittent supply. Occasional blackouts occur during which time Iraqi and US officials have no knowledge of what is going on. The POE lacks a dedicated phone landline to Basra. There is no Iraqi surveillance system. The POE lacks a formal trash collection or cleaning arrangement. There is insufficient potable water for staff or travelers, and raw sewage collects next to administrative buildings. There is little to no lighting during the night. Workers come for a one-week period and sleep in dilapidated accommodations or outdoors.

¶11. (S) The POETT has initiated and funded improvements. Construction of a new Iraqi Police station is about to begin. Contractors are running electrical wiring throughout the POE.

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Water and septic work is also in progress. A new ramp is under construction to facilitate faster cargo transfer. POETT staff has conducted training in the areas of basic POE operations like search procedures, technology, and professionalism. POETT officials contend that while the Iraqi staff largely understands these issues, they apply them only selectively. POETT officials have also offered to provide two electricity generators, but as the POE has no budget for fuel, this option might not be exercised. Other possible purchases include hand-held wands and a baggage scanner.

#### Despite Vulnerabilities, No Evidence of Lethal Aid or Militias

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¶12. (S) GOI and USG officials agree that potential vulnerabilities relating to criminal or even lethal nature exist at the POE. Despite the vulnerabilities, they emphasize that they have found no evidence of exploitation of the weaknesses. At the same time, they concede that this assertion does not mean that there is no lethal aid or militia members coming in; they have just not seen it. (Note: Some observers and GOI officials have speculated that some Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) militants who fled Basra to Iran after the March 2008 Charge of the Knights campaign could be slipping back. POE officials claim that they

have not been detected. End note). In addition, given the roughly 100 miles of lightly monitored Iran-Basra Province border alone, such activities might not be observed at the POE.

#### Significant Challenges

¶13. (S) POETT officials strongly suspect that away from the limits of the POE, smuggling exists, chiefly of oil. FSAT officials identified the lack of a bank branch as another vulnerability. Transactions are all done in cash, and according to FSAT and USG military officials, this increases the risk of corruption and various types of illicit money flows, including terrorism financing. While there have been discussions about installing a bank, there is none yet. Another vulnerability is the absence of a viable customs declaration policy at the national level. The policy should include documented procedures and controls, and a mechanism to share information with other GOI entities. POETT officials suspect that bulk and counterfeit cash has been detected, but not reported, by POE officials. Another concern, voiced in the past by GOI provincial and national officials, including former Basra Governor Wa'eli (ref E) regards possible Iranian efforts to influence the January 2010 Iraqi national elections by smuggling in fraudulent ballots, ballot boxes, or false identification cards.

Comment: Shalamsha Faces Challenges in Maturing as a POE

¶14. (S) Despite improvement, there are legitimate concerns. Inadequate screening, equipment, and training at Shalamsha create vulnerabilities for lethal aid or militia members, as well as smuggling of drugs, cash, and other contraband. This is of particular concern given the coming year's drawdown of US military presence and involvement. POETT officials expect infrastructure improvements to continue during and after the drawdown, but at a much slower pace. Without a USG presence, however, they fear that oversight may fall victim to endemic corruption unless the GOI acts quickly to improve port officials' pay and living conditions. The USG's options are limited to providing the infrastructure and human resource training and assistance in the remaining months. If the GOI expects to cement and build on USG initiatives, it will have to match the efforts of POETT with much harder work and more good will. Though the GOI has recently initiated some small projects and improvements at the POE, it will have to step up its efforts significantly if it hopes to quickly bring the POE up to international standards. End comment.

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